

**PGT Student Views
towards Research Ethics
and the Ethics Approval
Procedure: pilot study
findings**

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Abstract

Scholarship has highlighted the difficulty of teaching research ethics within the university context, identifying two key barriers: the conceptualisation of research ethics, and the language found on the ethics application. Yet the student perspective remains under-researched. The IOE MA Education requires all students to submit an ethics application as part of their dissertation project. However, students appear to struggle to understand or engage fully with the ethics process. With the aim of developing the provision of research ethics teaching on the programme, our pilot study aimed to explore students' perspectives, from what they understood about research ethics at the start of the programme, and how that developed through engagement with the teaching and resources currently available. Preliminary findings suggest that students began with a vague conceptualisation of research ethics, but this became more focused during the course. This allows us to develop a more comprehensive study with the 24/25 cohort.

Context

- Aware of tutor experience on MA programmes: the difficulty of ‘getting students through ethics’, where students appear to be struggling to understand and engage with the ethics process without having the time to consider what this really means.
- This affects teaching of research ethics – echoing Hyytinen and Löfström (2017, p.32): “The assumption that students do not enter higher education equipped with a sufficient understanding of research ethics and integrity has pedagogical implications”.
- **Aim:** how to present ethics as a learning element, not simply as a tick box/ hindrance to get through. Approaching the question from the student perspective: what students understood of research ethics, and how they viewed the process of obtaining ethical approval for their projects.

Literature

- Literature on teaching research ethics highlights challenges (e.g. Smith 2016): interdisciplinary consensus on the **difficulty of teaching ethics to students**, but limited attention paid to the student perspective (Sexton and Garner 2020).
- Some work on different cultural contexts (e.g. Smith 2016), or discipline-specific ethics (e.g. Eisen and Parker 2004 on medical ethics), due to different regulations (Rissanen and Lofstrom 2014). Also, on teaching research ethics as part of wider course on academic integrity including plagiarism etc (Shephard et al., 2015).
- Previous studies on **student perspective** used ethical scenarios to gauge participant responses and ethical sensitivity, e.g. Rissanen and Lofstrom (2014), Sexton and Garner (2020). However, we were less interested in pedagogy at this stage, but students' self-reported perceptions of the subject of research ethics.

Rationale

- However: given that students often struggled with identifying ethical issues (Section 8 left blank or barely completed), we started from a more explorative basis, to see what students had engaged with previously; this then led into a discussion of scenarios.
- The aim was not to evaluate the pedagogy per se (although this fed into the interview questions), but a broader discussion around what knowledge students were coming with, and how they regarded research ethics.

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

You must complete Section 8 even if you are doing research which does not involve participants.

All research raises ethical dilemmas and involves some decision-making on the part of the researcher, this includes research that does not involve human participants.

In this section, you should do two things: 1. Demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise because of your research. 2. Demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address.

Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply to your research from the list below.

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

***In addition, please ensure that you mention any transcription/translation software that you will be using to process and analyse your data.**

Enter text

Section 8

Here, you need to describe all the ethical issues related to your project.

Use the list as a guide to help identify the issues.

- Pilot qualitative study involving current cohort (2023/24) of MA Education students, with aim of wider study in 2024/25.
- **Aim:** to explore how postgraduate students develop their understanding of research ethics over the course of their Master's study in MA Education at UCL IOE by way of addressing the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do postgraduate students understand research ethics at the start of their MA study?
2. How do they see their understanding develop over the course of their study?

Ethics resources available to students on the MA Education:

1. Self-study via Moodle

- IOE has its own REC (legacy from pre-merger); due to the longstanding experience of work with children, working with under-18s is not necessarily seen as high-risk automatically.
 - Students use an **IOE ethics application form**, which has been slightly tailored for the MA Education. All PGT students must complete a full ethics application for their dissertation project. Approval is granted by their tutor and a second member of the MA Education team.
 - A range of resources available on Moodle in three sections via the [Dissertation Skills Sessions](#) tab. This includes instructional videos for each part of the ethics application (Session 16).
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Ethics resources available to students on the MA Education:

2. Workshops and tutor input

- **Ethics workshop** held online for distance students and in-person for on-campus students. (These sessions were attended by the study participants).
 - Two-hour session, consisting of lecture, followed by workshop with peer/tutor feedback. Students invited to bring their projects, focusing on the less generic parts of the form (Section 2: summary; Section 8: identifying ethical issues).
 - **Academic tutor** then guides students individually through the ethics application, providing feedback on draft work; this may be supported by the second reviewer, or Dissertation Team in specific cases.
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Participant Demographic

- While acknowledging ‘that what is considered ethical is culturally and temporally situated’ Smith (2016, p.96), we were less interested in examining the demographic specifics of the sample, e.g. home/international students, being guided by a general sense that everyone was confused.
- Anecdotally, we had observed that both **ethical concepts** and the **language/terminology** found on the ethics application was **a barrier to L1/L2 speakers**.
- Also, MA Education students come from a variety of UG backgrounds which could be accounted for more effectively through qualitative interviews.

Participants

- Recruited from MA Education 2023/24 cohort.
- **Five full-time students in initial focus group, down to four during individual interview phase, and three for the final focus group. This was small but allowed us to engage with them in-depth.** This is reflected in literature: Rissanen and Löfström (2014, p.25) found that ‘a very small number of students contacted about the survey replied’, wondering whether ‘there is a relatively small number of students who are eager to engage in ethical thinking and problem-solving’. Here, it may have been more related to timetabling of the study.
- Range of backgrounds and ages, e.g. some had studied in UK for UG.

Data Collection

Combination of focus groups and individual interviews. Group discussion chosen as a valuable pedagogical method (Sexton and Garner 2020, p.134); also to encourage discussion around a topic about which participants might feel uncomfortable rather than being put on the spot.

Focus groups:

December 2023 – start
of project

May 2024 – final wrap-up

Individual interviews:

scheduled to coincide with key dates in ethical
process on MA programme

February – after ethics workshop

March – suggested submission of ethics form
for dissertation project

Initial reactions: superficial approach (December)

- Little engagement with ethics prior to MA programme, not something students had thought about much. **Limited exposure to ethical approval processes** in UG studies, e.g. **‘as long as we email it to our tutor, we get approval’**. In contrast, the IOE ethics felt like **‘a very strict method’**.
- Questions at this stage focused on **how to complete the form**. More interest in whether there were **any checks that a researcher did follow what had been written on the ethics form**, and the potential penalties for not doing so.
- However, participants showed some awareness of sensitive issues: **‘religion, age, gender’**; a **‘personal issue’**, like **‘mental health problems’**; **‘feminism or maybe more LGBT kind of topic’**.
- Also concern for the **issue of consent** when conducting research on children:
 - **‘if I like behave, really weird in the class when I was really young and three, four years ago, I may kind of regret it. And if that is being recorded and being researched, I’d be actually worried.’**
 - **‘it’s [...] very difficult for a three-year-old, four-year-old child to understand. Yeah, even though you say, yes, when you're three like you actually say no when you are 31.’**

More than just filling in the form (February)

- Held after ethics workshop; some tutors held additional group tutorials on completing the forms, although limited engagement with self-study material on Moodle.
- Initially, the form was '**daunting**'. Or that it was simply a '**hurdle**'. However, ethical considerations started to develop beyond this: '[the form] was like something I just had to get over and then I could actually start doing my research, **but now I think it's part of the process and it's an important part of the process.**'
 - Gradual recognition of **potential harm to participants**, and that **participants needed to be protected**: 'I want to keep a balance between hurting my colleague and obtaining what I need for my research.' Also, that questions/ topical matter could be upsetting, including an awareness that **the way questions are phrased** may be an ethical issue.
 - Increasing awareness of the need to protect the **researcher** also: '**sometimes the researcher can also be the one who is harmed by this whole process**'. Linked with the issue of sensitive topics that were personal to the researcher.

The bigger picture (March)

- Beginning to ask questions about wider issues, and the relationship between ethical considerations and rigorous research: **‘What’s the point of the ethics application, of learning about ethics? Is it more to do with protecting the participants’ emotion, or feeling, or is it to do with getting that accuracy for research?’**
- Growing understanding of the unpredictability of research, and the implications for obtaining ethical approval: **‘human beings are a big variable. You can't really like imagine or predict and things that will happen during the whole process actually.’**
- Later, the same participant asked: **‘what if the ethics have already been approved and [when] the researcher is doing the data collection process there come some new issues that have not been covered in the ethics application. So, should they come back?’**

Ethics as part of rigorous research (May)

- Students felt that they had developed a greater sense of ethics from the process, although possibly also from the research project itself.
- A growing sense of the importance of ethics as part of rigorous research, that a focus on ethics **‘improves the research standing [...] I understand why research from certain institutions holds more credibility than others just because of all these considerations that some don't have’**.
- Students appeared to associate strict ethics with UCL and felt this contributed to its standing as a top university. However, it seems that students were associating ethical rigour **with the institution** rather than a broader question of ethics bodies or associations, e.g. engagement with their discipline.

Summary: 'The university is the foundation of human ethics'

- Students come in with a range of misconceptions or lack of understanding about research ethics, aligns with findings that 'students interpret and apply ethical codes and guidelines in different ways in the light of their personal values and experiences' (Hyytinen and Löfström 2017, pp.34-35).
- Their understanding appears to develop through engagement with the programme, although primarily through a more focused, individualised approach, e.g. tutorial groups. This suggests that research ethics, including form completion, should be taught separately from academic integrity.
- Sense that ethical considerations are part of rigorous research, which puts the onus on us as academics and tutors to promote clear ethical practice.

Going forward...

- **Limitations** of such a small-scale study based on self-reporting; however, this does chime with the literature, and is also the first study within the programme, so provides a useful basis for a more comprehensive study in 24/25.
- Wider scale study involving larger sample number from MA Education planned for 24/25, drawing on pilot findings to inform the questions.
- Welcome feedback/comments from audience.

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